Inheriting the Legacy of the Souls of the War Dead

Perkins, C. (2011).
Inheriting the Legacy of the Souls of the War Dead:
Linking Past, Present and Future at the Yūshūkan.
Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies, 11(3), [6]

Inheriting the Legacy of the Souls of the War Dead

Linking Past, Present and Future at the Yūshūkan

By

Chris Perkins

Lecturer
University of Edinburgh

e-mail the author

About the Author

Abstract

This paper analyses a narrative film *Mitama wo Tsugumono* sourced from the Yūshūkan museum adjacent to the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo. Taken as a particular manifestation of the broad nationalist movement in Japan, this paper shows how the film produces a structured ideological position on the role of remembrance and national identity by framing it in terms of a specific problem: achievement of an emancipatory form of identity in the context of both the totalizing nature of capital relations and growing social malaise in Japan. In doing so it details the work done by the film to construct and legitimize what O'Dwyer (2010), after Oakeshott (1933), calls a 'practical past', whereby 'a narrative of the past is not developed for its own sake, but in order to serve certain political, moral or religious convictions and purposes.' The paper provides a reading of *Mitama* that emphasizes the methods through which the narrativized practical past supplies socio-cognitive resources that imply logics of first-person action through their usage. Along the way it also details articulations the film makes with current social issues to legitimize its position. The paper concludes by considering the challenge of films such as *Mitama* in the context of continued social and academic concerns over Japanese society under increasingly neo-liberal capitalist conditions.

Key Words

Memory; History; Yasukuni; Value; Narrative; Media Studies; Film

Introduction

A growing literature has developed addressing the nexus of history, culture, politics and memory at the Yasukuni shrine and adjacent Yūshūkan museum (for example Breen 2007a; Nelson 2003; O'Dwyer 2010; Shibuichi 2005; Tamamoto 2001). This literature has tended to focus on issues surrounding the relations with China, the issue of Class A war criminals, the ethics of Prime Ministerial visits and the ritual and mnemonic practices at the shrine and museum. It is clear from this list that the Yasukuni complex is both a multifaceted and elusive object of enquiry. The issues represented by the shrine and museum cut across disciplinary boundaries– history, religious studies, philosophy and political science – with each discipline bringing its own central questions, assumptions and epistemologies as evidenced by the range of positions taken in an recent edited collection of essays on the topic (Breen 2007a). This paper contributes to the literature from a social constructivist perspective to analyse the relationship between the past, identity and action found in a film shown at the Yūshūkan called *Mitama wo Tsugu Mono,* which translates as 'Those Who Succeed the Spirits' but also means 'to inherit the legacy of the souls of the war dead' (from now on I will refer to the film simply as*Mitama*).

The rationale for doing so is twofold. First, in its explicit targeting of twenty-something Japanese, *Mitama* is a response to ongoing crisis of legitimization of the past remembered at Yasukuni coupled with the inevitable shift in the demographic the shrine and museum must address. As numbers of those who have a direct link to the war dwindle, new methods of linking Japanese lived experience – itself dynamic and embedded in social, political and economic change – to the rites performed at the shrine are necessary. Thus there is a need to map out the concrete processes through which these articulations are made as the shrine tries to maintain the relevance of its practices. Taking *Mitama* as one particular adaptive strategy, I show how the film produces a structured ideological position on the role of remembrance and national identity by articulating it with a specific problem: achievement of an emancipatory form of identity in the context of both the totalizing nature of capital relations and persistent social malaise in Japan (see Yoda 2006a).

This leads into the second reason for this study. *Mitama* offers a case study of continued attempts to deal with Japan's contemporary identity question through recourse to the past. As O'Dwyer (2010) observes, the Yūshūkan is a place that produces collective memory, which he notes holds some affinities with the philosopher Michael Oakeshott's (1933) notion of the 'practical past'. The practical past is categorically distinct from the disciplinary practice of history, defined as an epistemic community with systematic methods for making truth claims, in that it takes as its goal not the production of verifiable historical accounts, but narratives with some instrumental value. A practical past is constructed out of socially available mnemonic and historical resources from a unifying perspective located in the present in order to provide guiding narratives for action. Therefore, it will be produced in relation to a specific object around which it will cohere. Practicality lies with the resultant affective values: 'emotional dispositions which also function as action-guiding public goods, to be sought after and perpetuated in public life' (ibid, p.163).

Practical pasts are linked to identity and action. As members of communities we come to know each other and ourselves through the process of asking for and giving accounts of what we do within an inherited cultural and historical horizon narratives about the past: '[i]n successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we set a particular event or episode or way of behaving in the context of a number of narrative histories' (Connerton 1988, p.21). In this way identity is a practical social achievement: it is a *successful attribution* of action within a role through usage of narrative schema that members of a society ascribe to one another as collective knowledge (Schmidt 2008, p.193). Identity seen in terms of successful attribution draws attention to its essentially argumentative structure, as well as its internal relationship with action (cf. MacIntyre 1962). Attribution is a process of saying 'I *do* this because…', with the expectation that the attribution is acknowledged as valid; it is also a process open to potential 'why questions' that erode the legitimacy of the identity. Therefore a successful identity structure will be one that has structured, publically available resources through which to maintain identity claims, but furthermore one that ends on a claim that carries the legitimacy of commonsense truth, whereby the action and its description are objectively self evident and inseparable from each other.

However, with the implosion of the bubble economy at the end of the 1980s, the economic metanarrative of the boom years, which produced both a set of well defined identity roles within the economy and material evidence that these identities were producing social goods, gave way to discursive conditions

characterized by lingering anxiety and unease (Owada 2008). In the terms given above, 'I do this because…' attributions have become harder to ground and the 'why' questions less easily answered. This is both due to the void left by the economic growth narrative, but also late modern epistemic conditions that deny the possibility of unifying narratives themselves. Uncertain of what the nation should represent in the context of the postmodern proliferation of the sign-economy, the loss of sense of the body and the breakdown of the self and social hegemony (Iida 2000, p.456), Japan has found itself:

Locked in a double bind of late modernity, torn between two contradictory aesthetic solutions to its dilemma: the nihilistic and the ironic positioning of simulated identities and the attempted recovery of "true" identity and meaning by means of an existential leap into the realm of imagination (ibid, p.458)

Enmeshed in, and feeding off, this discursive logic and the conditions that have produced it, I demonstrate how *Mitama* makes an argument for contact with the spirits of the war dead and the necessity of the narrative history at the Yūshūkan that stresses its practical application in escaping the double bind. Primarily the film couches the importance of this narrative in terms of its ability to build a vocabulary for action from a foundational position external to capital relations granted by the temporality of the spirits of the war dead, who are taken to embody a contrasting value system. Therefore, in the following I provide a reading of *Mitama* that unpacks its dual role, both legitimizing the rites conducted at Yasukuni by linking the spirits to current social and economic issues in Japan, and providing socio-cognitive resources – accounts of action and answers to why questions – that creates a symbolic order of rooted, teleological obligations for both the characters and the intended audiences. In concluding, I discuss the challenge presented by practical pasts such as the one in*Mitama* and the establishment of a position external to the framework of capitalism in relation to continued debate in Japan over social justice, value systems and the possibility of critique.

Creating a film with flavour

In an interview for the Sakura Bunka Channel, a cable only television channel dedicated to the revisionist historical project, the film's director Matsuda Osayuki remarks that *Mitama* was developed in response to an older film where an old lady (*obaa-san*) simply walked around the Yūshūkan making comments on the exhibits (Sakura Bunka Chaneru 2010). His film, he suggests, was made to present a more subtle (*odayaka na*), dramatic exposition that would have more of an effect (*kōka*)

on the viewer. Matsuda explains that he wanted to add flavour (*aji tsuke*) to the piece in order to transmit a message to young people, and its general concept, he argues, lies in generating a sense of obligation to the shrine and what it represents in young people. The rationale behind this is stated in these terms:

I feel there is a danger that young people have no interest in the bereaved and those who have helped the Shrine. I want to say to these people that this shouldn't be the case – as long as you are Japanese this has something to do with you. There are people who say we should make a break with the past, but this [the events of the war and the Shrine] is linked to the future.

From this interview, the intended audience can be inferred as consisting of: (a) young Japanese who have (b) lost their link to past events and as such have (c) lost their link to a certain aspect of their culture as Japanese. This is then (d) linked to the future of people as Japanese. There is an explicit temporal framework being applied here and the choice is presented in stark terms: given as either a break or the recognition and appreciation of continuity of the past with the present and future, and the forms of obligations this creates. It is through the re-establishment of this linkage that the perceived danger can be negated. The outcome is left unspecified, in keeping with the important something (*taisetsuna nani ka*), whose discovery the Yūshūkan states as an intended goal. Indeed, the undefined nature of this something is significant, for its normative worth is specifically linked to its position outside logical reasoning. This something is explicitly linked to collective identity: '*as long as you are Japanese* this has something to do with you.'

The resultant film with flavour is narrative fiction that breaks into sections of documentary, using photographic stills and period footage to develop historical themes that provide support for the essentially affective identity-centric story. The first scenes are footage of the shrine cut with footage of soldiers, as well as people with their heads bowed in respect, while text overlaid states:

After the chaos at the end of the Tokugawa Period. All those who died to defend the independence and dignity of Japan. Why should we respect the spirits? Why is it necessary for all Japanese living now to touch the hearts of the spirits?

This framing is multimodal; the above caption is coupled with low droning music, which conveys a sense of gravitas and urgency. There are also visual clues as to the message that will be conveyed. After a shot of soldiers marching in formation we see an image of an old man and young boy both showing their respect for the

army. Here there is continuity between the three generations. As will be seen, however, *Mitama* portrays a contemporary Japan where this continuity has been severed due to the introduction of capitalist values. One of the major goals of the film, then, is precisely the removal of what is portrayed as a corrupted, inauthentic Japanese mode of being.

In the next scene we see 25-year-old university graduate Takanobu colliding with a mother and child outside their apartment block, knocking the child to the ground in the process. This is a concise representation of the problem to be addressed and an answer to the questions posed above: remedying a social context that produces people like Takanobu. Put simply, Takanobu is a troubled slob: he still lives with his parents (placing him in the category of *parasaito-shinguru* or parasite-singles, adults who stay at home and live off their parents), his room is a pigsty and he seems to live on handouts from his rich father. He has no manners, no goals and, as his girlfriend remarks early on, the only thing he seems to care about is making coffee properly. Further complicating this situation is his home life, which is described as containing 'three different value systems' under one roof. The value systems are stratified according to generation and take in selflessness of the grandmother, the selfishness of the father, and the self-doubt and apathy of Takanobu himself. The corrupted Japanese mode of being is given form in Takanobu's father. We are told in the DVD blurb that this is a man who: 'would kick others out of the way for material gain', towards whom Takanobu holds doubts that he cannot adequately articulate. Indeed, Takanobu is described as suffering from existential anxiety directly related to his father, and that due to his inability to deal with his feelings of doubt: '[Takanobu] spends his days worrying endlessly (*monmontoshita hibi wo sugoshiteita*).

What is immediately apparent here is that the film is not making a simple 'cornerstone' argument about the importance of the war dead, whereby Japan's post-war success is attributed to their sacrifices (Breen 2007b, p.156). As Breen (ibid, p.158) points out, such a position would be historically untenable given that it was postwar government restructuring under the Occupation and subsequent political and economic strategies (including the Yoshida doctrine and Prime Minister Ikeda's income-doubling plan) that made this possible. Instead, the film is at pains to draw attention to the moral consequences of the same economic development, painting a picture of Japanese youth lost within the economic system but unable to articulate a coherent position against it. Furthermore, the miracle generation itself is brought into question: the picture of Takanobu's father is explicitly negative. Indeed, as the embodiment of capitalist values he is the

antagonist that Takanobu must overcome. Breen (ibid) also notes that Yasukuni is often linked to Japanese moral regeneration, quoting Kobori Keichirō's position that if the Yasukuni problem could be solved: 'the attitude of the young towards Japan will be quite transformed.' *Mitama* gives form to the transformation Kobori talks of, while making the even stronger claim that the spirits at Yasukuni provide a fundamental, foundational position for the critique and ultimately negation of what it posits as a destructive neoliberal value system that has permeated Japanese society.

Takanobu's grandmother, a nurse in the war and sister of a soldier who died in battle, represents one possible linkage to the *Eirei*, the 'Glorious Spirits' of those who died in WWII and now enshrined at Yasukuni. However, although Takanobu has this direct link to 'authentic' first person memories of the war, it is ultimately his girlfriend Manami who introduces him to the Yasukuni shrine and gives him the chance to come into contact (*fureru*) with the *Eirei* at the Yūshūkan . Predominantly this contact comes via a wall of photographs of people who died in combat and diary accounts from *Tokkōtai* pilots (members of the 'Special Attack Forces' commonly referred to in English as the Kamikaze). These photographs, as Nelson (2003, p.454) argues, play an important role within the Yasukuni complex by humanizing the enshrined spirits, who officially have no personality or individuality. For Takanobu the physical appearances of the faces he sees are part of his transformation, and as will be seen later, it is in fact imperative that the spirits have histories, voices and faces in order for him to connect with them. Returning to the framing on the back of the DVD, through the experience of meeting these people, as well as his wider journey of discovery through reading the diaries, we are told Takanobu comes to want 'a new way of living', and 'bit by bit, Takanobu begins to change in concrete ways'. The nature of this change is relayed in the final sentence:

Takanobu comes to understand that alongside developing one's self, there is another way to live – where one throws away one's own wants in order to live for family, country, and more widely for others – and develops to become a worthy successor of those who came before.

As stated above, key to Takanobu's transformation is his girlfriend, Manami. In the film she is framed as another example of Takanobu's troubled generation, having endured the 'painful experience of family break-up' (*ikkarichi*). However, when we meet Manami at the beginning of the film, she is presented in stark contrast to Takanobu: she is up early, speaks politely to the rest of Takanobu's family and

dresses in a smart, modest fashion. From the very beginning she also displays a different value system, which is also comes into conflict with Takanobu's father early on: discussing Takanobu's laziness she says that 'whatever the work, if you do your best it can be enjoyable,' to which the father replies disdainfully, 'Ha. Work? Fun?' It is also intimated that Manami's current outlook on life has not always been the case. Later, when Takanobu gestures to two fashionably dressed girls on a shopping street and asks Minami why she doesn't want to dress like them anymore, she replies, 'I've had enough of that sort of thing'. Indeed, clothing is used as a signifier through the film of contending value systems, and 'that sort of thing' is both a reference to the clothing and a preoccupation with materiality and consumption the clothing represents. Takanobu himself starts off wearing T-shirts, baggy jeans and tops tied around his waist and through the film gradually progresses through to wearing shirts and pressed trousers, or suits; the gradual smartening of his appearance an external sign of his developing internal order.

In the shopping street scene the film introduces another theme that is used to justify the practical past it constructs: the psychological trauma of an unfair society. *Mitama*'s take on societal trauma is resolutely grounded in the present. Surviving members of the war generation are portrayed as happy, content and socially responsible. Instead it is the youth of today who are depicted as plagued by social and psychological problems. As representative of this generation, Takanobu suffers from a form of everyday trauma that he is unable to articulate, but nevertheless disrupts his ability to function: his lack of personal direction and his slovenliness being two examples. Here, however, the trauma is allowed to bubble to the surface in a physical panic attack. After saying to Manami that it is impossible (*muri*) for him to be like her he stops in the street and repeats 'impossible', 'impossible' over again. The camera at this point zooms into Takanobu's face, colours wash out, and we hear voices accusing Takanobu of being lazy and worthless: 'we don't need you. If you don't want to work why don't you just quit.' Here the film starts a critique of the value system that Takanobu is embedded in and it is this critique that is used throughout to legitimize the form of remembrance found at the Yūshūkan . The substance of Takanobu's trauma is a contradiction internal to him: a recognition that individual value is attributed via one's ability to integrate into the work force and be productive coupled with the inability to integrate into that value system, due to lingering yet inarticulate doubt in its validity. Erich Fromm's observations on the relationship between values under capitalism and identity seem particularly apt in this context:

If there is no use for the qualities a person offers, he has none; just as an unsaleable commodity is valueless thought it might have use value. Thus, the self-confidence, the "feeling of self", is merely an indication of what others think of the person. It is not he who is convinced of his value regardless of popularity and his success in the market. If he is sought after he is somebody; if he is not popular, he is simply nobody (2010 [1942], p.103).

It is here that the main argument of the film comes to the fore: the past supplied at the Yūshūkan can give people the tools to create a value system exterior to capitalism and work through the traumas suggested above.*Mitama*, then, seems to address Yoda's observation that the fundamental problem facing Japan today is: 'the permutation of the global order of capital into an increasingly direct and pervasive force organizing our world' (2006a, p.50). Yoda notes that this permeation has left Japan unable to question the status quo and that pockets of alternative imagination and creativity have withered over the postwar years (2006b, p.271). *Mitama*, through its method of constructing a practical, foundational past, seeks to supply an alternative by producing a linkage to pre-War Japan and thus give actors a structured symbolic commitment, and well ordered semiotic tools, for the construction of new sense-making possibilities about social relationships, the meaning of work and so on. These then go on to produce new logics of social action.

In summing up this section, it is possible to locate a number of the goals the film sets out for itself. First, it is making a statement about different forms of identity and their successful attribution. Already we see that in the film the selfishness of his father is ultimately attributed to the presuppositional role of capitalist accumulation in his ascriptions of identity and as such what counts as legitimate forms of social action. Thus the film develops a critique of postwar social and economic arrangements on its way to resolving the tensions it sets up for the 'everyman' protagonist Takanobu. The film's argument is that only by finding new foundations, and as such stepping outside of the postwar value framework, can a new identity be successfully attributed and maintained: a set of actions that derive their legitimacy not from accounts that refer to accumulation and consumption, but from a set of moral obligations found through a selective recollection of the past (although the film never presents it as such). On this logic, it is currently impossible for Takanobu to articulate a position against his father because there are no foundations for such a position within the hegemonic value system that his father both represents and belongs to. His journey through the film is thus one of building up the resources to successfully make his identity claims. This is a process

of resolving dilemmas and fixing down meanings. It is to this process that we turn next.

Resources from the Past, Actions in the Present, Obligations for the Future

In developing a set of descriptions to articulate his anxieties, Takanobu relies on diaries of *Tokkōtai* pilots supplied by Manami. At first Manami does not let Takanobu near the diaries, saying he is not ready for them. Instead, and by way of preparation, she takes Takanobu to the centre for disabled people that she works at, where Takanobu spends the day making paper boxes: a job that he approaches in his usual half hearted way. One of the people at the centre notices this attitude and loudly points it out, displaying obvious delight when Takanobu finally does the job properly. At the same time, Manami chides a girl for not doing her job properly and elicits an apology. Later, while Takanobu is pushing Manami on the swings, he asks her why she was so hard on the girl, to which she replies: 'you need to be able to say things like "good morning" and "sorry" in order to get along with everyone'. She goes on to talk about the effect working at the care centre has had on her, saying: 'Now that I am working there, when I go home its like I don't have to talk to anyone else.' Looking up from the swing Manami says: 'It feels like I am another person,' and before leaving Manami hands over a book.

Back at home, we see Takanobu eating dinner with his mother and father and this scene functions to reinforce the material wealth of Takanobu's family. To this end, his mother brings out plate after plate of expensive food, quite in contrast to the simple pot of curry and rice he ate at the care centre, and his father starts talking about his day golfing, remarking that he needs to get a new set of golf clubs to keep up with everyone. This seems to be last straw for Takanobu, who gets up from the table and storms up to his room. Here we also see that the missing member of the family – Takanobu's grandmother – is eating on her own in her room, physically and metaphorically separated from the expensive meal laid out on the table. Still lacking a vocabulary to articulate his frustration Takanobu knocks over some rubbish on the table and sits down. At this point he gets a message on his phone from Manami telling him to turn to the page in the book marked by a yellow post-it note. The page contains a message from a *Tokkōtai*pilot to his loved one, explaining that although he loves her very much, the country that she lives in is even more precious and that he 'wants to die for this treasure in his heart.' This sentence haunts Takanobu, who sends Manami a message asking for more books. After replying Manami smiles to herself and says: 'Come on, Takanobu' (*Sa, koi! Takanobu*).

The following scenes form a montage where with Takanobu in a suit and tie going out to interviews, exercising and not only cleaning his own room, but also cleaning up for others! All this is accompanied by readings from the books he has borrowed from Manami. But while the transformation is dramatic, it appears that he is still unable to find a job and it is obvious from Takanobu's expression that he still has doubts. This is where his father steps in, who has used his contacts to set up a job interview that Takanobu cannot fail to ace, describing the opportunity as 'rigged' (*dekire-su*). Takanobu is not too sure about taking up this offer, but he is then handed an envelope that when opened contains a rejection letter. This prompts Takanobu to set up the interview, seemingly giving up on the progress he has made and succumbing to his father's values. The deed done, Takanobu bumps into a friend in a comic book coffee shop (*manga kissa*), who states that he has dropped out of the job-hunting race to focus on an Internet business, which he says he enjoys. Takanobu reaches into his pocket and pulls out a green lighter, borrowed earlier in the film, which reminds him of another friend. They discuss this second friend, and Takanobu finds out that while he got a job, the workplace was unbearable, that it broke him and he attempted suicide. Now he is in hospital with 'mental issues, or should I say problems of the soul.' The first friend remarks: 'Right from the beginning he said "you get pushed into a terrible job and can't work out who you are working for, why you are working"'.

Two related social issues are being drawn upon here. First, as Yoneyama (2008) argues, bullying in Japan has become much more than just a problem in schools, but is a general social phenomenon that has grown since the 1990s. Quoting the work of Ogi Naoki, she argues that bullying is part of the rise of the 'logic of the powerful' in society as a whole placed within the context of US-style, Japanese backed neoliberal policies (ibid). These policies threaten established social conventions and norms, and in turn produce a sense of insecurity. In this context, she suggests, that bullying occurs, and the prime motivator is fear brought on by a sense of lack of agency within the structure of business and the economy. Second, the setting of this scene in a comic book coffee shop invokes phenomenon of Net-Café Refugees (*Netto-kafe Nanmin*) which was brought to national attention by a Nippon News Network documentary in 2007, where people with money difficulties, family problems or part-time and day workers unable to get permanent accommodation, have been forced to sleep in 24 hour internet cafés and fast food restaurants. This issue has become symbolic of fears over widening social and economic gaps between classes in Japanese society (*Kakusashakai*).

As Takanobu processes the information he looks around. On the side next to a computer is a half eaten instant noodle box, spilling over. A young man comes in from the shower, barely able to walk from exhaustion. It is clear from the context of the scene that these two elements signify and reinforce the film's conception of the predicament of Japanese youth today: unable to eat properly and snatching sleep whenever they can in order to find a place in an empty Japanese mode of production. In *Mitama* the fact that Takanobu tried hard to find a job but failed, and indeed could only find employment through nepotism, in effect closes down a particular argumentative strategy for the current value system. In response to the objection that the neoliberal capitalist system encourages self-help, and if you work hard enough you will succeed, *Mitama* says 'No!'; and even if you do, you will be entering a world of psychologically damaging workplace bullying. Thus, *Mitama* sets up its escape route: wholesale disengagement from the value system itself via a foundational position found in (arbitrary) remembrance as the only viable option. And through this concern for the present, the rites of Yasukuni gain legitimacy.

This experience seems to bring Takanobu back from the precipice, but this is only confirmed when, on his way home, he stops by at Manami's uncle's coffee bean roasting shop. Here he learns to roast coffee beans by hand, a process that he gets much pleasure from. He is told to feel his way through the process, and when he remarks that he has wasted a lot of beans, Manami's grandfather replies: 'of course you failed. You fail and you learn.' After drinking coffee made with the beans Takanobu has roasted, Manami's grandfather begins to talk of Takanobu's grandfather's death. What is striking about this scene is that he tells the story almost jovially, recounting with evident warmth how he drew pictures of Japanese delicacies for his friend while he was dying. Again there is a complete lack of trauma and this seems to come from Manami's grandfather's confidence in his own role and what it entailed. Almost as a test of this confidence, Takanobu states, 'you were dragged away to face something terrible'. But this question is used to set up the narrative to knock down another assumption that would undermine the logical structure of the practical past being produced. Manami's grandfather replies in a stern voice: 'no, you're wrong. You can bear a grudge but nothing will change. Everyone thought: we have to fight here for our country.' Like the *Tokkōtai* dairies, in supplying another resource for the successful attribution of identity claims the film now appeals to personal memory. Manami's grandfather's memories are used as a defense mechanism against the memories that O'Dwyer (2010) refers to as acting in a checking capacity on practical pasts. He sternly points out that he can

remember, he knows the truth, there was meaning, there is something to hold onto. And through this appeal to personal memory and experience, the meaning of those experiences is further fixed down.

However the film does not rest at this, and switches into a quasi-historical documentary mode, now using the tenor of historical fact to make the case that Japan was a beacon of light for Asian and African countries colonized by the West and it was this resistance to colonization led to the Pacific War. Thus the sacrifice of Japanese soldiers did not just end at the borders of the Japan, but had ramifications for Asia and beyond through the invocation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (*Dai-tō-a Kyōeiken*). Photographs of Asian nationalist leaders are displayed and the timbre of the voiceover changes to suggest what we are listening to now are direct quotes from these leaders (there is no direct attribution). We are told that Japan gave birth to the struggles for national independence through its fight with the West; we see images of bombers, American tanks and the final spectacle of the mushroom cloud. And after the documentary section has concluded, the Sphere is again invoked, not as a dead idea but as both a practical future and moral obligation. The coffee growers of Papua New Guinea, depicted as the stereotypical half clothed, backward native, are used as a further argument for the establishment of a Japanese identity grounded in a positive remembrance of the past. It is only through this positive identity that the Japanese can emerge from their narcissistic, masochistic identity troubles and do good in the world and help the less fortunate. The appeal to national identity rests on an obligation towards the international community, a position evocative of former Prime Minister Nakasone's 'healthy nationalism', which he saw as a prerequisite for going forth into the world (see Hood 2000, p.65).

This message is augmented by the next scene, in which Takanobu reads that the actions of the *Tokkōtai* were not for victory but were 'connected to the conditions for peace, to the fate of the Japanese people; yes, the pride of the people' (*minzoku no hokori*). This sentence does the temporal work of instigating a set of first person moral obligations. Takanobu has gone through a process of not only fixing down the meaning of experiences of the Pacific War, but also of fixing down what is means to claim to be Japanese himself while remaining consistent to that experience. Thus the narrative has produced a logic of first person obligation that dictates a certain course of action: not only has he acquired the resources to imagine something different, this something different has become a logically necessity if he is to hold onto them (cf. Poole 2008). This point is well illustrated by Takanobu himself when, after reading the section described above, he says to

himself: 'The pride of the nation. Connected. To me?' And after one last trip to the Yūshūkan , we see Takanobu in an elevator where he says to himself: 'Am I okay?' To which he answers: 'I am okay.' As he steps out to tell the interviewers that he no longer wants the position we hear the sound of the *Tokkōtai* aeroplane. The successful articulation of past and present is completed in this action, undergirded by a defensible narrative for the attribution of his new identity both to himself ('I am okay') and others, as we will see shortly.

The stage is now set for the final confrontation between Takanobu and his father. Takanobu takes a job at Manami's uncle's coffee shop, but when he tells his father how much he will earn (100, 000 yen plus travel expenses) his father looks on in disbelief. Takanobu suggests that feeling (*kimochi*) is more important and there is more to life than money. At this his father explodes, striking Takanobu and blaming Manami for taking his son to a strange (*myō na*) place like Yasukuni. At this point a fight breaks out and, true to the logic of the film, it is up to Takanobu's grandmother to settle the dispute and move Takanobu's journey towards its final resolution:

Koichi [Takanobu's father], you are an upstanding person. I am thankful to you. But it is not the case that your way of thinking is the only way of thinking. Manami and Takanobu are not wrong.

However, the next lines negate this admittance that Takanobu's father is a good person, as Takanobu says:

I learned from the Spirits at Yasukuni. It came like a blow to the head. In reality we were like that. Nobody wanted to fight. Smiling, helping each other, living with each other. In order to protect that bond they would have done anything. They gave their lives! Japanese people were like that!

With this short speech the lingering question of the exact nature of the inherited value system is answered, although in a fittingly vague manner. Breen (2007b, p.159) asks the same question of the Kobori, who it will be recalled argued for Yasukuni's role in revitalizing Japan's moral order, coming to the conclusion that the ethics must be 'loyalty towards the emperor, love of imperial Japan and self-sacrifice'. Of these three, only self-sacrifice makes it onto Takanobu's list, and it is not self-sacrifice for the emperor or the abstract idea of Imperial Japan, but for friends, families and comrades. This is augmented with the ambiguous concept of

emotion or feeling (*kimochi*), which is transcendent rather than material or instrumental in purpose.

However, even these virtues, depoliticized and rendered unproblematic, are too much for Takanobu's father, who is left mumbling 'no matter how many times I hear this I don't understand.' Like Takanobu's original position at the beginning of the narrative, this incomprehension is significant. In this fight Takanobu's father is completely unable to make sense of his son's transformation and as such resorting to violence directed towards both Takanobu and his Manami. He is unable to recognize the validity of the position taken by Takanobu, Manami and his mother: his understanding of the logics of practice, the commonsense ways of being Japanese (working hard, suffering, for material gain being paramount among them) mean that he does not have the resources to make sense of their claims. An identity claim such as: 'I do this because this is how we are' does not make sense according to Takanobu's father's understanding of the normative rules that constitute the 'we'. There has been a complete reversal, now Takanobu's father lacks the vocabulary to assert his own identity claims about acting as Japanese within a the small community made up of his family members because they do not share his presuppositional commitments.

The emacipatory promise of this identity now fulfilled, the film moves onto the sorts of action enabled and the obligations enacted when Takanobu tells Manami that he is going to Papua New Guinea, the source of the coffee shop's beans, invoking the now living idea of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, with Japan leading the way against the neoliberal, neocolonial, world economy, all under the watchful gaze of the spirits at Yasukuni. The film ends a year later, with Takanobu taking out the rubbish and meeting the same mother and child. This time he says good morning in a strong positive voice, and the boy throws him a football. The mother asks him to take part in a community-cleaning scheme, which Takanobu agrees to do. The shot changes to his Grandmother with Takanobu's father reading a magazine in the background. She is talking to the spirit of her brother:

Takanobu has become a trustworthy person.

At which point Takanobu's father grunts:

Mother, you are naïve.

Conclusion

While this article has taken a largely descriptive route through Mitama, detailing the way it constructs its argument in relation to current social issues, in concluding I will try to draw out some of the broader implications. In doing so it is first useful to recount some comments made by the documentary maker Li Ying, who made a film about Yasukuni, subsidized by both the Japanese and Chinese governments, but subsequently pulled from many cinemas due to a nationalist backlash (see Brasor 2008; Veg 2010):

…there was a symposium in Tokyo in 1997, at the time of the 60th anniversary of the Nanking Massacre. They screened "Nanking," a propaganda film made by the Japanese military after the battle. The film showed the formal ceremony marking the fall of Nanking, with the raising of the Japanese flag and the singing of the national anthem. An unbelievable sound began to spread through the auditorium. For a moment, I thought I was hearing machine-gun fire. It was passionate applause. I found myself shaking involuntarily….I was shocked at how the gap in our perception of history and our perceptions of problems was much larger than I had imagined. What was behind this divergence? Why was it that, 60 years after the end of the war, the problems were still unresolved and the same phenomena were repeating themselves? This symposium wasn't just for intellectuals and scholars. It was an open, public meeting. In the audience, there were men wearing suits, students, women, the types of people you could see anywhere. It was these people who were applauding and cheering. From that point, I began to think that maybe the problem of Yasukuni wasn't simply a problem of the right wing (Ying and Sai 2008).

It would be easy to dismiss *Mitama* as isolated and bankrupt in its one-sided representation of the war dead. There are also contradictions in the plot itself: for one the friend Takanobu met in the coffee shop has managed to extract himself from corporate life, and it is assumed he did this without recourse to the spirits at Yaskukuni. Nevertheless, for the reasons observed by Ying its isolation is less easy to maintain. But furthermore, the themes embedded in *Mitama* mirror those found elsewhere. For example there is resonance with the structure, if not the conclusion, of Fujiwara Masahiko's wildly popular *Kokka no Hinkaku* (2006). In his own aesthetic solution to the double bind presented at the beginning of this paper Fujiwara argues that in attaining economic prosperity Japan lost many of the characteristics that made it a great nation, a nation with dignity, and much of this is to do with western formal rationality. As he states:

Whatever logic it may be, to say this way is logically correct and to go forward as such, will bring human societies to disaster. It does not need stating that logic is important. But, logic is not enough (ibid, p.35).

These observations are then used by Fujiwara to launch a critique of the supposedly western values of democracy, freedom and equality before laying down a number of principles for Japan based on the idea of a country of feeling and form and the Samurai code of Bushido. These are posited as a priori social goods, framed in such a way as to detach them from problematisation (as such an endeavour would necessitate recourse to logical argument, which is the problem in the first place). Fujiwara's west is a caricature, much like Takanobu's father, and his Bushido values are romanticized, like the spirits in *Mitama*. However, the success of the book suggests it is an argument with some salience. And as Kamakura (2008, p.31) has observed, these arguments play favorably with nationalist sentiments from, for example, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo; sentiments that let the state off the hook for wholesale implementation of capitalist logic to begin with. Furthermore, these arguments open up conduits for reconsideration of the Peace Constitution. This appears as a latent subtext in the film itself. At multiple points throughout the film we are reminded that this is also a political issue via a television tuned to the news in Takanobu's house: we see flashes of items about former Prime Minister Koizumi's visits and near the end of the film a snatch of a speech about the kidnapping of Japanese citizens by North Korea. This last news item neatly articulates the identity narrative it supplies to issues of state security, evoking questions over the logic of the peace constitution in the presence of such threat.

As Bellah (2003, p.61) argues, it is always the case with fundamental ordering principles that they 'are not open to question…[they] can be seen as "polluted" by various evil forces, from which they must be defended, but they cannot be attacked.' Likewise, *Mitama* offers no place within its narrative for other identity strategies in an increasingly diverse Japan. Indeed, when viewed in tandem with the recent battle over the place of the Hinomaru flag and Kimigayo anthem in schools we see a forceful symmetry: the construction of one vocabulary for identity claims at the Yūshūkan is coupled with revocation of another in the courts. Another striking aspect of this ostensibly nationalist production is the way in which it mixes conservative themes with questions traditionally associated with the political left: namely the socially destructive aspects of capitalism, notions of social justice, the relationship of mental health to societal institutions and so on. However, like the overall narrative found at the Yūshūkan, Mitama presents a

version the war and the war dead with all negative traces expunged (Breen 2007b), and as [a] process of remembering and forgetting that is constitutive of a new form of identity, *Mitama* discards memories that serve no practicable purpose in its proposed management of current social processes (Connerton 2008, p.63). The reason for this is clear. As the escape route from the social conditions produced by capital relations in Japan is posited as the imperative social good, any remembrance that undermines the foundation for this reorientation must be forgotten.

It is this practical, foundation building capacity – the ability to re-settle the subject within an objective symbolic order – that makes foundational accounts so powerful, and it is not clear the relativised historical subject of current leftist politics can adequately compete. The problem of finding a vocabulary of critique is not a fiction constructed by *Mitama*, but a real world problem. As Masaru Kaneko (Masaru and Masaomi 2003) observes, in contemporary Japan:

...language does not capture people's feelings; obvious goals are not apparent; and there are no channels for expressing opinions. Under these circumstances even imagination, anger, and other basic human emotions are collapsing.

Narratives such as the one in *Mitama* will only be successful (the premises for its practical past taken for granted) to the extent that people see the vocabulary it enables as solving the problems Masaru observes above. But if the exclusionary narrative of *Mitama* draws its legitimacy from a need in the present, perhaps the best way to counter its argument is to starve it of its oxygen, the precarity it depicts, and address the present concerns themselves. In this way a recent and varied literature on Japanese education and social bullying (Yoneyama 2008), suicide (Ozawa de Silva 2008), and Japanese identity (Iles 2008) has appealed to the sorts of humanist accounts found, for example, in the work of the above referenced Erich Fromm. These accounts are themselves foundational in that they try to capture the human condition in its perennial form, but this should not be taken as an appeal to an essential Japanese-ness, but as a call for a multiperspectival approach to human goods through consideration of the socio-economic, spiritual and the psychological in their complex interaction through human experience (Fromm 2010 [1956], p.264). Through such analysis human goods may be derived that do not need foundations in exclusionary narrative pasts. As Iles (2008) notes, the shift to humanism might not be a fashionable move. However it might be a necessary one that enables the normative assessment of

society from the perspective of human needs and in doing so recapture ground at risk of being colonized by exclusive identity narratives.

Back to Top

References

Bellah, R, N., 2003. *Imagining Japan: The Japanese Tradition and its Modern Interpretation*. London: University of California Press Ltd.

Brasor, P., 2008. Yasukuni Film and NHK's Declaration to Promote National Interests: Government Funding, Free Expression and Propaganda in Japan. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. [Accessed 4 February 2011].

Breen, J. ed., 2007a. *Yasukuni, the War Dead and the Struggle for Japan's Past*. London: Hurst Publishers Ltd.

Breen, J., 2007b. Yasukuni and the Loss of Historical Memory. In: Breen, J. ed.*Yasukuni, the War Dead and the Struggle for Japan's Past*. London: Hurst Publishers Ltd, 143 – 162.

Connerton P., 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Connerton, P., 2008. Seven Types of Forgetting. *Memory Studies*, 1 (1), 59 - 71.

Fromm, E., 2010 [1956]. *The Sane Society*. London: Routledge.

Fromm, E., 2010 [1942]. *The Fear of Freedom*. London: Routledge.

Fujiwara, M., 2007. *Kokka no hinkaku*. Tokyo: Shinchōshinsho.

Hood, C., 2001. *Japanese Education Reform: Nakasone's Legacy*. London: Routledge.

Iida, Y., 2000. Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero: Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990s. *Positions*, 8 (2), 423 – 464.

Iles, T., 2008. *The Crisis of Identity in Contemporary Japanese Film: Personal, Cultural, National*. Leiden: Brill.

Kamakura, T., 2008. *Kokkaron no Kagaku*. Tokyo: Jichosha.

MacIntyre, A., 1962. A mistake about causality in the social sciences. In: Laslett, P., and Runciman, W. G., eds. *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (2nd edition), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 48 – 70.

Masaru, K. and Masaomi, K., 2003. Is there a Tomorrow for a Japanese Society without Hope? A Dialogue between Kaneko Masaru and Kaneko Masaomi. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. [Accessed 4th February, 2009].

Mitama wo Tsugu Mono, 2008. [DVD] Japan: Yasukuni Shrine.

Nelson, J., 2003. Social memory as ritual practice: commemorating spirits of the military dead at Yasukuni Shinto shrine. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 62 (2), 443-467.

Oakeshott, M., 1933. *Experience and its Modes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Dwyer, S., 2010. The Yasukuni Shrine and the Competing Patriotic Pasts of East Asia. *History and Memory*, 22 (2), 147 – 177.

Owada, H., 2008. In Search of a New Identity: an analysis of the nation psyche of post-war Japan. In: Rein T. Segers. Ed. 2008. *A New Japan for the Twenty-First Century: an Inside Overview of Current Fundamental Changes*, Abingdon: Routledge, 235 – 250.

Ozawa de Silva, C., 2008. Too Lonely to Die Alone: Internet Suicide Pacts and Existential Suffering in Japan. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 32 (4), 516 – 551.

Poole, R., 2008. Memory, History and the Claims of the Past. *Memory Studies*, 1 (2), 149 – 166.

Sakura Bunka Chaneru, 2010. Mitama wo tsugumono wo seisaku shite – Matsuda Osayuki Kantoku ni kiku. Online [Link inactive: Accessed 4 August 2010].

Schmidt, S. J., 2008. Memory and Remembrance: A Constructivist Approach. In: A. Erll and A. Nünning, eds. *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 191 – 202.

Shibuichi, D., 2005. The Yasukuni Shrine Dispute and the Politics of Identity in Japan: Why all the Fuss? *Asian Survey*, 45 (2), 197 – 215.

Tamamoto, M., 2001. A Land Without Patriots: The Yasukuni Controversy and Japanese Nationalism. *World Policy Journal*, 18 (3), 33 – 40.

Veg. S., 2010. From Meiji Modernity to the Nanjing Massacre: Yasukuni's Critical Perspective on History and Memory. [Accessed 4 February 2011].

Ying, L., and Sai, Yoichi., 2008. Yasukuni: the stage for memory and oblivion. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. [Accessed 7 July 2011].

Yoda, T., 2006a. A Roadmap to Millennial Japan. In: T. Yoda et al. eds. *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*. London: Duke University Press, 16 – 53.

Yoda, T., 2006b. The Rise and Fall of Maternal Society: Gender, Labor, and Capital in Contemporary Japan. In: T. Yoda et al. eds. *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*. London: Duke University Press, 239 - 274.

Yoneyama. S., 2008. The Era of Bullying: Japan Under Neoliberalism. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 1-3-09. [Accessed 4 February 2011].